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THE PETERBOROUGH IDEA

BY EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON

IN one of Bret Harte's romantic parodies—in that of Dumas *père*, I believe—the exaggerated hero works himself into a state of desperation over the lack of a ladder just thirty-seven feet long, and suddenly trips over something in the grass that proves to be a ladder just thirty-seven feet long. If the number of feet was not thirty-seven, it was some other number; and it was one that was in exact accord with the exaggerated hero's romantic necessities. And if this introduction seems irrelevant, let me say that in the Spring of 1911 I found myself in a situation not extravagantly unlike that of the aforesaid hero, save that my problem was far more complicated, and if anything less favorably designed for immediate solution; for I found myself in possession of a thing I was pleased to call an Idea for a Work of Art, and one that required, for its most advantageous working out, a combination of conditions that was not promised by the sights, smells, temperatures, and noises of New York City during the Summer months, or by any enforced seclusion that I had then in mind.

What I required, or at least wished for, was a place in the country, not too far from the civilizing conveniences of life, that would afford comfortable lodging, good food, a large and well-windowed sleeping room with a good bed in it, an easy walk to breakfast at about seven-thirty, a longer walk to a secluded and substantial building in the woods, a large open fireplace and plenty of fuel, a free view from the door of the best kind of New England scenery, a complete assurance of a long day before me without social annoyances or interruptions of any kind, a simple luncheon brought to my door by a punctual but reticent carrier, a good dinner at night with a few congenial people, an evening without en-

forced solitude or enforced society, and a blessed assurance that no one would ask me to show him or her what I was writing.

Having attracted the attention of Destiny to these few casual suggestions, it occurred to me that Destiny might have to move perceptibly out of its way in order to fulfill them all at once; and I had trained myself to forget pretty much all about them, when it happened that I met a literary friend of mine to whom I repeated a few of them. I might have repeated all of them, but all of them were not necessary. The two suggestions of complete solitude during the day and of a house in the woods were sufficient to bring about my realization not only of those two, but of all the others—not to mention several more that I have not had the assurance or the complacency to set down. "Why don't you try the MacDowell Colony?" he asked. "Colony?" I repeated after him. "Does a friend of mine talk to me of 'colonies' when I tell him that what I want is a commodious house in the woods, preferably with a cement floor, and with no one to bother me between eight or nine in the morning and six at night? What are friends good for anyhow?" "Do you know anything about the place?" he ventured, I thought a little timidly. "No," I said, "except that it is a 'colony': and that's enough." "Do you believe," he rejoined, "that Edward MacDowell would have encouraged the kind of 'colony' that you seem to have in mind?" I had to admit that such a belief was a difficult one to entertain; and I succumbed to the extent of listening to him while he painted again the picture that was in my dreams. I did not believe much of what he said, but I listened to him because he was a friend of mine and because he had written some things that I liked.

Well, the result of my friend's insistence was a reluctant journey on my part from New York to Peterborough, New Hampshire, with a long and pusillanimous halt in Boston—where I could be sure of my ground, even if I could not have there a stone house in the woods, with seven screened windows and a screen door that opened on the peak of Mount Monadnock seven miles away. Finally, when I realized that the Fourth of July had come and gone, and that summer was going after it, I found out how to get to Peterborough, and in three hours I was there; but only after a dubious and rather unhappy ride, during which I was pursued and

haunted unceasingly by the ominous word "colony," which buzzed and bit me like an obnoxious insect that might have hatched itself from the worm that smote the gourd of Jonah. Colonies of ants or colonies of microbes I could tolerate, but colonies of artists and writers were too much for the contemplation of a "difficult" poet who had a small but intensely select public that was said to be growing. I believed that I might possibly stay in Peterborough for as long as two weeks, at the end of which time I should call upon my alleged creative faculty for some elaborate lie that would insure my quiet if ignominious escape. But my escape did not go into effect until the end of the following September, when I was called back to New York, after having worked for nearly three months in uninterrupted harmony with all the suggestions that I had filed with Destiny, not much expecting to hear from them again. I found here not only what my friend said that I should find, but infinitely and surprisingly more.

I found nearly everything that I did not much expect to find, and hardly anything that my conventional doubts had anticipated. For about a week I employed myself in trying not to enjoy my liberty and solitude, and in being glad that I was not in New York. But one may do these things almost anywhere in the country. I knew that, and I knew there must be something unusual about the place, or I should not like it when I was trying so hard not to like it. I knew there was something that I had not yet found, and I learned what it was when one day I discovered, rather of a sudden, that the MacDowell Colony was beyond a doubt the worst loafing place in the world. I had loafed now for more than a week, but I had not rested. I did not begin to rest until I began to work; and it was not until I began to work that I began to understand what had been the matter with me. Hitherto my long-suffering conscience—a New England conscience at that—had never made any special fuss to remind me of so banal a thing as lost opportunity. I had lost so much and so many kinds of opportunity that I supposed my conscience had become calloused on the industrial side, and had ceased to respond to this particular defection on my part. But I was woefully wrong. During the next ten weeks I did more work, got more out of living and out of nature, and became better acquainted with myself than during any part of the past three or four years. And fortunately for me, by nature

and long training one of the laziest of mortals, I was early in realizing that this long desired opportunity of mine to get away for awhile from the world and to express a part of what the world had given me, was the direct and almost immediate result of what was once a thought in the mind of a man who had foreseen what all this might mean some day to others. In his own life it was hardly more than a persistent wish. Today it is five hundred acres of land and a score of substantial buildings, nearly all of which are invisible to the tenants of the others.

Before I try to say what the Peterborough Idea is, I should like to say as gently as possible a few things that it most emphatically is *not*. In view of some of the more grotesque and pathetic misconceptions concerning it, it may be well to say at once that it implies neither a school, a sanitarium, a summer resort for incurable amateurs, or an experiment in misapplied æsthetics. There are no "students," for the simple reason that there is no place for them. There are no teachers, or professors, or advisers. There are no bells, and there are no "hours." There are no amateurs, until they are found out; and they are found out in Peterborough as in other places. Perhaps they are found out in Peterborough a little sooner than in other places. There are no annoying regulations to irritate the most sensitive and responsive talent, or to interfere with the most robust and uncompromising genius. I have said that the MacDowell Colony is in all probability the worst loafing place in the world. It is also, in all probability, about the worst place in which to conceal one's lack of a creative faculty. With each year the place becomes automatically more exclusive (I use the word, of course, in its serious and literal sense), and with each year come fewer—there were never many—of those who would, and eventually do, find a more congenial and inspiring environment elsewhere. And it is not intended that more than twenty or twenty-five people shall ever be working here at the same time.

But misconceptions are a part of the burden that must always be borne by those who undertake something that is radically different from anything that the public has known before, and the philosophical and tolerant creator of the Peterborough Colony accepts them with angelic forbearance and good humor. If there is one of these many misconcep-

tions that annoys her more than another, probably it is the prevailing delusion that the place is intended primarily, if not exclusively, for the impecunious—the truth being that the question of money has nothing whatever to do with the advantages that are offered. Some of the best work that has been done here has been done by artists and writers of recognized standing, with incomes sufficient to render the financial side of their advantages a negligible matter. On the other hand some of the best work has been done by those whose incomes are still more or less problematical—a fact that has hardly sufficient novelty to inaugurate a new epoch in the history of the Fine Arts. The basic purpose of the place is not to foster the “promise” of a few indigent neophytes, or to soothe the shattered hopes of a few indigent wrecks. On the contrary, neophytes and wrecks are alike ineligible.

The MacDowell Colony is, let me say again, the splendid outgrowth of a thought that was long in the mind of the most serious, the most scholarly, the most inspired, and probably the most thoroughly sophisticated of American composers. It is not easy to associate the name and the ideals of Edward MacDowell with the encouragement of mediocrity, or with the frittering away of time and opportunity that offer almost incredible advantages alike to the poor and to the independent. Money cannot buy elsewhere what is offered by the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough to the serious worker, and the reason for this is that what is offered in Peterborough to the serious worker does not exist elsewhere. If it does exist elsewhere, I have never found it; and I have worked, I fancy, under what might be called a fairly representative variety of favorable and unfavorable conditions.

It is practically impossible for me to say, even to myself, just what there is about this place that compels a man to work out the best that is in him, and to be discontented if he fails to do so. The abrupt and somewhat humiliating sense of isolation, liberty, and opportunity which overtakes one each morning on his way to work has something to do with it, but this sense of opportunity does not in itself explain everything. There is, over and about the place, a mystical touch that cannot be explained any more than MacDowell's *Keltic Sonata* can be explained. The presence of a great genius is always here, although the man

himself is absent; and this presence is not one to confirm or foster any unhappy misconceptions in regard to charity-patients or incorrigible amateurs. The place is a workshop, not a wonderland; or perhaps I might better call it a workshop with a wonderland thrown in. But one must work and be in earnest, and he must know that others know that he is in earnest, or the wonderland will give him but a sorry sort of pleasure. The few who have attempted to forego the workshop for the wonderland have not had a very good time, and they are not likely to come again.

The place is not only a workshop, but one for those who have already achieved something that contemporary criticism believes to be important. Contemporary criticism makes a great many sad mistakes, no doubt, but contemporary achievement can have no other judge or sponsor; and for this reason some of those who have achieved what is in them to achieve will always be advanced in their own time beyond their deserts, while others may be long submerged, and finally exterminated, for lack of opportunity.

Now the purpose of this place is to furnish that opportunity to those whom the best of contemporary criticism has accepted as a matter of course, and to those who are said by experts to deserve it: that is the Peterborough Idea. Nature has a great deal to say in these matters, and probably there is no place where she says more to the man or woman who has already done something significant than she says here in Peterborough. The mere fact that a man or a woman has written a few books, or painted a few pictures, or composed a few songs, or modeled a few images in clay, means little or nothing now among intelligent people. In fact, it is rather a distinction nowadays not to have done one or more of these things—unless one has done something sufficiently forceful and original to be suggestive, at least, of endurance. For the world must have its art, or the world will be no fit place for man to live in; and the artist must have his opportunity, or his art will die and the artist will die with it.

A great deal of well-meaning nonsense has been said and written about the so-called selfishness of the creative faculty, but a small reading of history should be enough to

indicate some fraction of the price that has been paid by the creator, in most instances, for his indulgence of that selfishness. In the opinion of many, a good artist is like a good Indian; and he will probably remain so. At any rate, it was with this probability in mind that the creator of the Peterborough Colony as it is today, Mrs. Edward MacDowell, found herself ready and eager to sacrifice everything else for the noble and unselfish and effective realization of what was once a thought in the mind of Edward MacDowell: a thought that is now an achieved—and, it is to be hoped, an enduring—ideal.

EDWIN ARLINGTON ROBINSON.